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How Can We Decide for Nicaragua?

U.S. Has No Case to Pass Judgment

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A stunning electoral victory did not give Ronald Reagan a blank check to rewrite history, nor did it endorse his passing judgments on foreign countries.

But he may think it did. How else could he have called the Nicaraguan *contras* our "brothers" and "freedom fighters"? How else could he have likened leaders of the hated Somoza national guard, who make up most of the leadership of the *contras* today, to heroes of the American Revolution?

In his first term, Reagan pursued a policy that pushed the Sandinista government of Nicaragua away from us—that, in effect, helped to radicalize the Sandinistas. Reagan reversed uncertain attempts by the Carter Administration to provide economic aid for the Sadinista regime. Instead, Reagan's policy was apparently designed to make the anti-Sandinista *contras* more respectable and the Sandinistas more hostile.

But the Sandinista revolution was an inevitable one. It succeeded in turning out one of the greediest dictatorships in Latin America, that of the Somozas, father and sons, who had ruled and exploited Nicaragua—often with warm support from the United States—for 42 years. Overthrown with the last of the Somozas was the national guard, whose members had committed cruel atrocities that shocked decent people around the world.

Now, Reagan calls the *Somocistas* our brothers and reapplies the word cruel to the Sandinistas. He even says that the Sandinistas, who forced out the Somozas, do not have a "decent leg to stand on."

It is true that unpleasant characters have turned up in recent months at Managua. It was probably inevitable that a regime drawing rhetorical abuse from Reagan should attract some of our adversaries from other parts of the world—even Iranians and the Palestine Liberation Organization, who are glad in any situation to do what they can to discomfit the United States. But the Managua government has also attracted idealistic young Americans and West Europeans, eager to help build up a new Nicaragua from the ruins of the Somoza past.

Reagan has looked through the cloud of atrocities that marked the Somoza national guard to find heroes and "freedom fighters." He doubtless believes that if the *Somocistas* return to power they will install a government that he will like. We might ask, instead, if it will be a government that the Nicaraguan people will like. Will it be a government that can bring peace and prosperity to that troubled land? The *contras'* reputation does not give much ground for hope.

From all that Reagan likes to say about democracy, we must assume he will agree that the most desirable government is the one that the Nicaraguans themselves would want. Who but the Nicaraguans should make that choice? In fact, they did make such a choice on Nov. 4, 1984, in an election that indeed was more of an exercise in democracy than could be enjoyed by the peoples of certain countries numbered among our fast friends.

What we Americans should like to see in Nicaragua is a government that would bring peace and prosperity to Nicaragua and at the same time promote the welfare and happiness of Central America as a whole. We seem to forget this latter goal, but there was a time when our greatest objective in Central America was the promotion of the Central American Common Market and the integration of the republics of Central America into a community or union providing us with a strong, prosperous and peace-loving neighbor on the South—a trading partner for commerce and an ally in a dangerous world. When I went to El Salvador as ambassador in January, 1961, the secretary of state's main guidance was to do what I could for Central American integration.

Not now. How better to thwart integration then to send arms and support to prolong an already costly civil war?

Central Americans often know more about their problems and the potential solutions than even U.S. Presidents might know. Especially today, when our leadership sees all problems in terms of East-West conflict, we are in danger of overlooking the best solutions to the problems of Nicaragua and its neighbors. Instead of pushing ahead with military measures, it could be better for all concerned to seek peaceful solutions.

There has long been a great yearning among Nicaraguans to shake free of the controls that the United States has exercised over their nation's political existence. Nicaraguans learn early in life about the American filibusterer, William Walker, who ruled the country from 1855 to 1857. Ruben Dario, one of the greatest Latin American poets, was a Nicaraguan whose lines 80 years ago urged his fellow countrymen to beware of the iron claws of a "godless" American President.

Even the paladin of democracy, Woodrow Wilson, intervened with force and landed Marines in Nicaragua. From his Administration until 1933, United States troops occupied Nicaragua. They supervised elections and in effect ran the country. When they finally left, Nicaragua was under the control of a national guard trained by the United States and commanded by Gen. Anastasio Somoza Garcia.

Patriotic Nicaraguans had supported the popular guerrilla leader Cesar Augusto Sandino, who symbolized opposition to the occupying forces. After Somoza saw to the elimination of Sandino in 1934, over four decades passed in which Somoza and his two sons ruled the country—openly bragging of the support they gave the United States and of the support the United States rendered them. The elder Somoza, who liked American slang, even boasted of "batting a thousand" in his votes for United States positions at the United Nations. That sort of subservience could not be popular in Nicaragua.

Little wonder that when the inevitable reaction to the Somozas flourished, the insurgents took the name of Sandino, who personified the zeal of the Nicaraguan people for freedom from United States tutelage.

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Some American politicians lamented the fall of the dictatorship, but farsighted statesmen welcomed the new assertion of Nicaraguan independence as potentially a good example of democracy in the free Western world. Reagan policy-makers were not among them. They preferred the military option: to provide arms and training for the enemies of the new government. They even added a manual of dirty tricks and sabotage.

What might have been better for Nicaragua and Central America was a peaceful diplomatic effort. The opportunity was at hand. The Contadora countries—Mexico, Panama, Venezuela and Colombia—were at work on a peaceful, legitimate solution. Their tools were the diplomacy of mediation. Their purpose was to achieve peace and reconciliation throughout Central America without military action. Contadora offered a break from the past, when the United States had been all too ready to use Marines, arms aid or CIA intervention, overt and covert.

Reagan may think electoral victory assures free rein, but there are constraints. Most obvious is the charter of the Organization of American States, which, in Article 18, says with crystal clarity that no state, or group of states, has the right to intervene directly or indirectly, for any reason in the internal or external affairs of any other state. Other Presidents have violated Article 18, but the article and charter still stand. No vote of the American people relieves the chief executive of his responsibility to respect the OAS charter, solemnly ratified by an overwhelming vote of the Senate.

It is not too late to seek the peaceful way; if Reagan really wants to win the Nobel Peace Prize, he must do it by peaceful means. Tangible support for Contadora may give him his chance.

Daniel Ortega's meeting with the U.S. bishops and his initiative in arranging a meeting with Secretary of State George P. Shultz can improve the atmosphere. A Peace Prize aspirant should use diplomacy to replace a shouting match or an arms buildup.

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